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Sustainable forest management as means to enhance self-reliance and promote climate resilience in displacement settings

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Issue brief

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Greening the Humanitarian Response Project

This issue brief has been prepared by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), within the framework of the project **Greening the Humanitarian Response** (GHR), funded by the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO). The project builds on the work FAO has done with UNHCR and partners to alleviate pressure on the environment and support energy access for both displaced and host communities in various parts of the world.

This project is a global initiative that promotes good practices and innovative approaches, enhances existing assessment methodologies and creates data evidence on environmental impact, energy needs and related challenges. At the country level, in Djibouti, Somalia, Uganda and the United Republic of Tanzania, biophysical and socioeconomic assessments have been conducted to establish baselines and inform decision-making for short-term and long-term planning. This helps to sustainably manage forest resources around displacement settlements, enhance energy access for cooking and build livelihoods and climate resilience.[1]

Key findings

- Comprehensive and adaptive nature-based solutions integrating sustainable forest management are crucial to adopt early in displacement. **This helps minimize environmental impact and balance woodfuel demand with supply, ensuring sustainable access to cooking energy.**
- Fuelwood and charcoal are the primary cooking fuels in many displacement areas, leading to high demand of woodfuel contributing to the degradation of surrounding forests and other woodlands. There is a critical need for alternative energy solutions, such as briquettes, solar-electric and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), to reduce reliance on woodfuel. However, financial constraints make these options less accessible for many displaced people. **Enhancing existing cooking systems to improve fuel efficiency and reduce health risks is often a more viable solution.**
- The most vulnerable groups – including women, children, the elderly, and people with specific needs – are exposed to heightened risks of violence, exploitation and neglect. Integrating gender-inclusive practices into forest product value chains not only enhances opportunities for self-reliance but also improves the success of forest management initiatives. **Pursuing protection and Accountability to Affected People (AAP) principles** are essential to ensure that the rights of vulnerable people are prioritized, while promoting the active role of affected communities in decision-making for environmental sustainability.
- **Country-specific policies for forcibly displaced and stateless people and their hosting communities significantly impact the durability of environmental and energy interventions.** For example, Uganda's self-reliance model allows for greater inclusion of refugees. Djibouti's recent policy improvements should enable more sustainable natural resource management and energy interventions in this context.
- There is a strong **need to generate data and evidence on the linkages between sustainable natural resources, energy access, livelihoods and climate resilience**, particularly in the context of displacement which often exacerbates pressures on already fragile ecosystems.

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Background

Conflict, violence and persecution, climate-related shocks and stresses as well as economic turbulence are increasingly driving humanitarian crises and displacement. As of June 2024, more than 122.6 million people had been forcibly displaced by conflict and persecution worldwide, including more than 37 million refugees.[2] Tens of millions of refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless individuals come from, and now live in highly climate-vulnerable situations. Data from 2022 indicate that 84 percent of refugees and asylum seekers come from highly climate-vulnerable countries.[3] A large proportion is living with little prospects of durable solutions, in protracted displacement settings[1] where governance systems are weak, including those for the equitable access and management of natural resources. Furthermore, refugees' capacity to prevent, anticipate, withstand and recover from extreme and slow-onset events as well as to adapt to these in the longer term, is often very low.

It is estimated that 80 percent of forcibly displaced people worldwide rely on forest products as a source of energy for cooking, wild food and fodder, material for shelter and cash income.[4] In turn, forests and trees outside of forests are crucial for supporting food security, energy access and livelihoods of displaced and host populations. In addition, forests offer vital ecosystem services, such as freshwater supply, soil stability and fertility, agrobiodiversity, biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration, all of which contribute to the resilience and self-reliance of these communities.

The current scale and duration of forced displacement, marked by sudden and large influxes of populations, often exacerbates pressures on already fragile ecosystems and their communities. When large numbers of displaced people arrive in an area, meeting their life-saving needs may lead to significant pressure on local resources unless mitigation measures are adopted. These mitigation measures rely on a high capacity to address impacts of hazards and environmental degradation on areas hosting displaced populations, recognizing that protecting the environment and strengthening resilience to climate shocks and stresses is essential for ensuring human safety, well-being and self-reliance.

Mitigation capacity can be enhanced by long-term reforestation, forest rehabilitation, adoption of agroecological practices and responsible ecosystem management, soil restoration, conservation and restoration of water resources, air quality and biodiversity preservation in displacement-affected regions.[5] The latter can also provide easier access to more abundant natural resources, thereby improving nutrition, health and economic outcomes, while also enhancing safety and protection particularly for women and girls.

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A UNHCR-supported project is now training refugees to grow bamboo for stabilising hillsides in landslide-prone areas of camps in Bangladesh.

[1] A protracted refugee situation is one in which 25 000 or more refugees have been in exile for five years or more in a given asylum country (UNHCR master glossary of terms. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/glossary. Accessed 29 November 2024).

Scope and objectives

This brief provides an overview of the complex interplay between access to natural resources, environmental degradation and vulnerability to climate, all within the context of building resilience and protecting forcibly displaced people and host communities.

Moreover, it highlights challenges and opportunities for the effective inclusion of forcibly displaced people and their hosting communities into sustainable forest management systems. Specifically, the brief offers insight into integrated policies on forests, energy, livelihoods and climate for more effective responses in the immediate and longer-term, consistent with the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Humanitarian, Development, and Peace nexus approach.

The brief supports the overarching goals of responsible ecosystem management, food security, poverty reduction, gender equality, social cohesion and reduction of vulnerability and conflict. Key target audiences include decision-makers, civil society, donors and humanitarian, development and peace actors.

Challenges and opportunities

Over the past years, the FAO and UNHCR partnership has been capitalizing on each agency's strength to support self-reliance, resilient livelihoods, and overall, enable the achievement of durable solutions for refugees, IDPs, stateless and host communities through sustainable and technically sound assistance.

The GCR adopted by the UN General Assembly on 17 December 2018 represents a collective commitment to transform the way the world responds to forcibly displaced situations, ensuring that host communities receive the necessary support and that protection and assistance provided to refugees can foremost ensure their right to life, safety dignity and productive lives. The GCR provides a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility sharing, acknowledging that sustainable solutions to refugee situations require international cooperation.[6] A whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach, including risk-informed evidence-based governance systems and capacities, is essential for the development and success of inclusive sustainable forest management practices.

However, intersectoral collaboration in addressing the complex relationship between forests, energy, and livelihoods in displacement settings is still insufficient to cope with existing and future challenges. There is also a need to improve monitoring of the results achieved across these sectors.

Challenges:

- **Limited inclusion of forcibly displaced communities in international climate agreements**: International climate agreements often lack specific provisions for the inclusion of displaced communities in sustainable forest management initiatives.[7]
- **Underdeveloped support mechanisms**: Despite the fact that the Paris Agreement acknowledges the need for increased support to prevent deforestation, reduce forest degradation, and promote sustainable forest management, innovative financial mechanisms are needed to address social and environmental challenges in displacement situations.

Opportunities:

- **Leveraging forest-based solutions:** Recent international agreements, including the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework,[8] the Paris Agreement[9] and the 28th Conference of the Parties (COP28) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) outcomes,[10,11] highlight the critical role of ecosystem conservation and restoration, including forests, in achieving climate goals and supporting livelihoods. To achieve ecosystem conservation and restoration in displacement situations, governments, humanitarian and development actors should strengthen their collaboration to address immediate and long-term needs, build resilience for forcibly displaced and host communities, and pave the way for durable solutions, all while aligning with international priorities.

- **Capitalizing on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR):** The framework addresses the role of forcibly displaced communities in building resilience through engagement from all of society in a multi-sectoral approach, including sustainable natural resources management.[12]
- **Building climate resilience:** Ensuring that sustainable forest landscape management is part of DRR interventions that countries implement, which can strengthen the climate resilience of displaced and host communities and reduce their vulnerability to future shocks and stresses.
- **Promoting inclusive and equitable approaches:** By explicitly including and engaging displaced communities in sustainable forest management initiatives, policies can foster more equitable and just outcomes, aligning with the principles of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Key messages

1. Building livelihood and climate resilience for forcibly displaced and host communities by encouraging innovation and scaling up good practices for sustainable forest management and ecosystem restoration.

- Develop a participatory and strategic planning of forest resources in each displacement setting that relies on forest resources. This should be standard practice to prevent or minimize the environmental and social risks, while promoting sustainable use of natural resources, conservation and equitable benefit sharing in the displacement-hosting areas.
- Promote market-based and innovative financing options to strengthen and scale up investment in reforestation, restoration and conservation efforts in displacement setting. Link them to carbon markets which will provide financial incentives for both public and private stakeholders.
- Champion innovative solutions, bioeconomy approaches and sustainable agroecological practices, such as crop rotation, intercropping, agroforestry, urban forestry, insect farming and synecoculture, combining traditional and local knowledge with technological innovations.
- Support data-driven decision-making and improve knowledge base and data sharing on environmental impact, energy needs and conflict sensitivity consideration.
- Establish a multi-agency monitoring system to track forest degradation and deforestation, but also afforestation, restoration and conservation measures in and around displacement settings. This system should support collection, analysis and dissemination of data and information, and closely monitor the progress, quality and success of relevant programmes.
- Improve the technical capacity of local authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other relevant stakeholders and deploy technical expertise and rangers to monitor forest use and encourage management plan through non-confrontational approaches. Implement this while engaging displaced and host communities to develop community-based forest management and monitoring.
- Design strategies for improved access to safe jobs and equal access to productive resources in support of women's economic empowerment to tackle the economic consequences of displacement and diminish the risk of negative coping strategies.
- Facilitate safe and equitable access to land and other natural resources, skills development opportunities, viable markets and financial services for the development of sustainable agriculture and livelihoods.
- Secure tenure rights to avoid conflict over land use and reduce potential conflict over the use of natural resources.

2. Enhancing safe energy access through clean and efficient technologies to improve food security, reduce health risks from household air pollution and minimize environmental impacts.

- Whenever possible, avoid establishing dependency on locally harvested biomass. Promoting alternative and renewable energy sources decreases the time burden of women and girls, improving the food safety of their household and minimizing their exposure to gender-based violence.
- Integrate emergency energy needs into contingency plans, humanitarian needs assessments, market analysis and humanitarian interventions.[13]
- Share data platforms accessible to multiple actors to capture accurate information on selected clean energy indicators, allowing to establish a baseline and benchmarks and to measure progress.[13]
- Facilitate access by displaced people to a selection of affordable, sustainable, safe energy sources and stoves for cooking, considering expected demand and preferences, local infrastructure, supply chain, regulations, resource availability and technical feasibility.[13]
- Promote market-based and innovative financing models to support access to clean and efficient technologies at the household level.
- Launch education campaigns promoting energy efficient practices and innovative technologies.
- Promote cooking devices that save fuel, such as pressure cookers (in the case of LPG), and heat retention baskets to boost fuel savings and maintain heat for longer periods.
- Ensure spare parts are locally available and include operation and maintenance activities of cookstoves (and their accessories) in programmes to ensure longer device lifespan. Train local technicians to manage the repair of stoves.

Tree distribution campaign supported by FAO at the Holl Holl refugee camp, Djibouti.

3. Integrating into humanitarian responses effective social and behavioural change strategies and gender transformative approaches. Promoting equitable access and sustainable management of natural resources in areas hosting displaced populations, with attention to social and cultural norms and power dynamics.

- Identify social, cultural and gender norms of affected communities around natural resource use through formative research.[14] This research should pinpoint key behaviours, understand contextual drivers and recognize protection and conflict risks, along with barriers and change enablers within the community.
- Develop awareness-raising and educational activities on the sustainable use of natural resources for displaced and host communities.[15] Such activities should help understand the implications of cooking habits and fuel use, encourage environmentally sustainable behaviors and drive long-term behavioural shifts.
- Prioritize two-way communication, participatory decision-making, and capacity building to foster equitable access to and sustainable use of natural resources and empower displaced and host communities.
- Develop behavioural-change approaches which are culturally- and gender-transformative, acknowledging the often-traumatic experience that leads to displacement.
- Promote behaviours that encourage dialogue and collaboration between displaced and host communities to strengthen local economies, foster self-reliance, and promote peaceful coexistence.
- Introduce fuel-saving practices that respect user habits, ensuring new cooking technologies match the cooking items of the host community to avoid upgrading refugees' conditions beyond those of the host community.

4. Advocating for national responses that implement integrated and inclusive policies and optimize synergies between the forest, energy, water, livelihoods, and other sectors, in alignment with relevant national and international policies and frameworks.

- Promote a unified and comprehensive approach to forest management, water and energy solutions, and livelihood support in displacement settings, emphasizing equitable and sustainable solutions.
- Foster partnerships between humanitarian and development actors to enhance multilateral cooperation and integrated policies in forestry and energy sectors for displaced and host communities.
- Strengthen regional coordination for effective policies related to transhumance and pastoral development, land use and governance, disease control and cross-border measures.
- Promote the inclusion of agriculture and forestry as a priority sector impacted by disasters, including climate related ones, in national DRR and climate change policies, strategies and plans.
- Advocate for acknowledging the negative impacts of climate change on displaced communities and associated non-economic losses and damages (such as potential loss of territory and cultural heritage), taking into account how these negative impacts interact with pre-existing gender inequalities.
- Promote the integration of displaced populations and their specific needs into National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and DRR policies, strategies and plans and that they are supported by institutional DRR systems at various levels.

5. Mainstreaming a climate resilient, people- and protection-centred approach that is accountable to all persons of diverse age, gender and other characteristics.

- Increase the engagement of stakeholders in decision-making for sustainable management of forests and other natural resources, including displaced and local communities, with particular attention to marginalized groups. This is key for the benefits to be sustained beyond a project's duration.
- Foster interventions that build on inclusive methods engaging target communities in the planning, implementation, and monitoring stages. This participatory approach not only ensures that information collected or disseminated is relevant and culturally acceptable, but also allows for communities to take ownership of their initiatives.
- View accountability to affected people in displacement settings not as a stand-alone activity, but rather as an integrated approach that can improve programme quality and effectiveness while preserving, protecting and enhancing the rights of people in situations of vulnerability.[16]
- Adopt a gender-responsive approach to tackle the particular vulnerabilities of displaced women and other vulnerable groups according to a multisectoral analysis.
- Place the needs and priorities of affected people at the centre of decision-making, while taking care of doing no harm. When providing humanitarian assistance, address the threat of increased displacement numbers and their complex economic status without harming either the environment or local livelihoods.[17]
- Ground approaches in robust analysis and management of drivers and triggers of socio-political tensions and violence, including risk of conflict over natural resources.
- Implement a robust grievance redress mechanism and feedback system that allows forcibly displaced and stateless people to provide input through diverse and accessible channels. This system should ensure timely and confidential responses, allocate adequate resources for feedback management, and foster collaboration with partners, thereby maintaining accountability and improving programme effectiveness for vulnerable populations.[18]

Women at the Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya.

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